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Constructing *Jefferson's Nephews*:  
a Speech to the Kentucky Library  
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Boynton Merrill, Jr.

President Bedford, members and guests of the Kentucky  
Library Association, my friends:

Each one of you here tonight knows more about libraries than I do, and it is likely that you also know more about books in general than I do. Consequently, I was pleased and flattered to be invited as an expert to discuss one book with you. Fortunately it is a book with which I am quite familiar (since I wrote it), and it is a book whose preparation led me into pleasant and frequent contact with so many librarians in Kentucky and other states. I owe you many thanks and I am here in gratitude for the able help you gave me.

President Bedford suggested that you might be interested in the book *Jefferson's Nephews*, why I decided to write it, how it was put together, and finally was published.

*Jefferson's Nephews* was the first prose I had had published. It was printed in 1976 by Princeton University Press shortly after the University Press of Kentucky published a small volume of my poems entitled *A Bestiary*. Except for *A Bestiary*, *Jefferson's Nephews* was my first book and the events of its writing and publication probably seem far more memorable and unexpected to me than they would to a recognized scholar or a prolific, established author.

At this point, for those of you who do not know the story on which the book is based, I should like to outline the tragedy briefly.

This story begins in Albemarle County, Virginia, where in the early 1740's two families opened nearby plantations in what was then frontier wilderness. One family was that of Col. Charles Lewis, and the other was the family of Peter Jefferson (father of Thomas Jefferson). For three successive generations there were one or more first cousin marriages between the Lewis and Jefferson



families of Albemarle County. One of these marriages was between Col. Charles L. Lewis and Lucy, a younger sister of Thomas Jefferson. As the 18th century drew to a close, both these families had acquired considerable wealth, most of it in the form of land and slaves, but bad times were ahead, especially for the Lewises, who suffered from a succession of agricultural failures, and probably poor management as well. By the year 1807 Col. Charles L. Lewis had been forced to sell all his slaves and the land as well, except for the portions he had previously given to his grown sons, Randolph and Lilburne, who were married and had families of their own. There was practically nothing left for the youngest son, Isham, now that the aging Colonel and Lucy were destitute.

It was at this time that the two sons, Randolph and Lilburne, decided to take their families and emigrate to Kentucky, a choice that was common in Virginia during those hard years. Their parents, Col. Charles and Lucy, and three unmarried sisters decided to go along with them.

The two sons had sold their property in Virginia and bought large tracts of land on the Ohio River, about two miles upstream from Smithland at the mouth of the Cumberland River. They came west in midwinter down the Ohio in flat-boats, and after a dreadful journey, arrived at their land and established their homes. Lilburne built his house on a high eminence in the center of his 1,000 acre farm, and named it Rocky Hill.

In spite of the riches of the frontier, the fish, game, timber, and fine virgin soil, the difficulties faced by these families in the next three years were heartbreaking. Among many other health problems, they suffered from chronic malaria, and endured medical care which we would consider primitive; hard cash was in extremely short supply, and Randolph and Lilburne, being "land poor," began piling up debts and lawsuits. It also appears that as haughty self-styled aristocrats, the Lewises were envied and resented by most of the other settlers. The misfortunes of the family were multiplied when in 1809 Lilburne's beloved wife, Elizabeth, died at the age of twenty-seven, and scarcely a year later, Lucy, Lilburne's mother, died as well. There was a promising note of happiness when, a year and a half after he became a widower, Lilburne married again, this time to Letitia, the lovely young belle of the county. But tragedy returned a few months later when Randolph, the steady elder son, died, supposedly from a snake bite. The Lewis hopes for a Kentucky dynasty were falling apart.



It was about this time that Isham Lewis, the unmarried, foot-loose, youngest son, appeared at Rocky Hill for a visit of undetermined length. Lilburne, nearly distraught with grief and other personal problems, had begun to drink, a growing habit in which Isham apparently joined him. This unholy liaison culminated in a ghastly crime involving George, a young teen-aged slave of Lilburne's.

Driven by either resentment or fear of Lilburne, George ran off on a skulking spell. On Sunday, December 15, shortly after his return, George was sent to fetch water from the spring at the foot of the steep north slope of Rocky Hill. He was given a pitcher in which to carry the water, and on this errand somehow or other he broke the pitcher, which supposedly had been Lucy's. In a transport of drunken rage, Lilburne, with Isham's help, dragged George into the kitchen cabin that stood near the residence, stretched him out on the floor and bound him securely. They next assembled the other slaves in the room and had them build up a roaring fire in the fireplace. It was late at night, and in the eerie light of the flames, Lilburne bolted the door and told the terrified slaves that he was going to teach them a lesson about disobeying his orders. He took an axe and with a full two-handed swing sunk it deep into George's neck. It was a mortal and nearly decapitating blow three inches deep and four inches wide.

Lilburne and Isham then forced one of the slaves to take the axe and dismember George's body. The pieces were cast on the fire so there would be no evidence of the crime. While the gruesome cremation was under way, it is said that Lilburne lectured his horror-stricken slaves, and warned them that if they told anyone about George's death, they could expect the same treatment. It was shortly after two o'clock on Monday morning when the first mighty shock of the stupendous New Madrid earthquake of 1811 struck. The chimney immediately collapsed on top of the fire and George's sizzling remains, smothered the flames, and brought the dreadful last rites to a halt.

The murder was not discovered until nearly three months later, probably because Lilburne kept his people confined to Rocky Hill, and in fear for their lives if they told. When the chimney fell and extinguished the fire, George's body had not yet been consumed. Sometime before dawn, a dog, perhaps Lilburne's own hound, Nero, came by and carried off part of George's remains. In March, a



neighbor was passing on a nearby road when he discovered the dog at the roadside gnawing on George's head.

The news of this discovery, and presumably the grisly evidence as well, was taken to the authorities, and the two brothers were indicted for murder by the grand jury which met very shortly thereafter. Because the regular circuit court judge was not present at that session, Lilburne and Isham was released on bail, bound over for trial to the next session of the circuit court which was scheduled to meet three months later.

The brothers returned to Rocky Hill to wait, objects of public odium and morbid curiosity. The strain on all the Lewises appears to have been unbearable, for during this period, Mary, the widow of Randolph, died of unknown causes, leaving eight orphan children, and Letitia, Lilburne's young wife, fearing for her own safety, fled from Rocky Hill to her father's home in Salem, taking with her Lilburne's newborn son.

The abandonment by Letitia was the excuse Lilburne gave for the final insane decision of his life. As the trial date drew nearer, Lilburne prevailed upon Isham to form a suicide pact, and in mid-April of 1812 they went to the graveyard on the crest of Rocky Hill, determined to "present a gun at each other's breast, and at a word, fire". The pact did not go as planned, however, for Isham survived. It appears that Isham asked Lilburne what to do in the event Lilburne's flintlock failed to fire. Lilburne showed Isham how to reprime the rifle, rest the butt on the ground with the muzzle pointed at his chest, and push the trigger with a stick. At this point, Lilburne slipped and actually touched the trigger, firing the gun into his own heart. Isham, thoroughly horrified, could not bring himself to imitate this act, and he fled.

Isham was captured a day or two later, and put in jail as accomplice to the suicide. He remained there twenty-three days until he escaped under mysterious circumstances, fled from Livingston County, went to Natchez, married there, and then was killed in the battle of New Orleans three years later.

These are the main elements in this macabre story and I think you can see how one could become absorbed in the unanswered questions which permeate every aspect of it.

Now I should like to tell you how I first learned about this story and how I came to write the book.

In the early 1960s part of the farm where I lived in Henderson was condemned by the State Highway Department in order to



build a by-pass and clover-leaf intersection. The State took fifty acres, cut off twenty acres more, and built over a mile of non-access fence around much of what was left. The legal case was in preparation and the courts for more than two years. It left me with mistrust and dismay over the way governmental agencies operate, and so when the settlement was finally paid, and I decided to invest it in another farm, I began to look for a place that would never be condemned for a major highway or interchange. There was a perfectly isolated farm on the Ohio above the mouth of the Cumberland River about two miles from Smithland, Kentucky, and I bought it. Within a year I learned that the Army Corps of Engineers was going to build a high dam across the Ohio River two miles downstream from my new farm, and that this dam would raise the pool stage twenty-six feet and would flood fifty acres of the best bottom land on the farm.

As it turned out the disappointment over the flooding of this farm has been more than off-set by another completely unexpected development. It happened that part of this farm lay in the Rocky Hill home plantation that Lilburne Lewis bought in 1807. I began to hear sketchy versions of the legend and, as a pastime, began to collect bits and pieces of the historical background of the farm and the Lewis family. Over the years there had been occasional imaginative newspaper feature articles about the grisly murder and I read these, as well as the book by Robert Penn Warren, *Brother to Dragons*, first published in 1953. It is a poetic dialogue, based on an outline of the Lewis legend, a respected piece of literature that has recently been revised and republished.

After reading *Brother to Dragons* I still wondered about the unknown actual facts behind the Lewis story, and I began a more purposeful search in the court house records in Smithland and in books dealing with the frontier of 1810 in Kentucky, the way life was lived there, and the people and ideas that influenced America at that time, most notably, of course Thomas Jefferson, our greatest political visionary.

Behind my desire to find the facts was the real question: How could the same family that produced Jefferson also have produced two such monsters as his violent and depraved nephews, Isham and Lilburne Lewis?

After a while I began keeping a record of the sources of the information as it came to light. For the first two or three years I did not anticipate writing a book, consequently at a later time



I had to go back and relocate many of the sources of the material I had at hand.

Of the several steps of putting together a book of documented history, by far the most enjoyable was the first step, research. In fact, as each stage in the process came along it was more tedious than the previous one. Since I was under no pressure to meet a deadline during the research period I had time to follow every lead and even to investigate things I only suspected about the characters. This was rewarding. For example, I spent three days in Natchez, Mississippi, working in the courthouse records for some trace of Isham Lewis's presence there and found nothing I could use. At this time Mrs. Clara Lee Whitt, of Marion, Kentucky, was assisting me in research, so I asked her to go to Natchez and try her luck. A few months later she went and struck up a friendship with one of the venerable ladies of the courthouse staff. Together they uncovered a book of Judgments containing the information that in 1810 Isham had borrowed \$235.00 from a man who died shortly thereafter. Isham was sued when he did not repay the money to the man's estate and when the trial was scheduled "Isham Lewis, the said defendant although solemnly required, came not, but made default". He had absconded.

This was a nice piece of detective work and it proved the suspicion that Isham had been in Natchez. It turned part of the legend into fact, and was an exciting find. Another bonanza discovery was quite unexpected, but came as the result of plodding work. By plodding work I mean not tracing down leads or suspicions, but rather reading material that probably did not contain much useful information, such as the Kentucky House and Senate Journals covering the years from 1806 to 1815, in all twenty volumes, which I read. The unexpected discovery, however, was found in the Livingston County courthouse records, in the bundles, to be exact.

The use of the word "bundles" refers to the legal documents that pertained to any given case put on the court docket. When the case was settled and went off the docket these documents were assembled and folded into a small bundle about two by six and one-half inches. The bundle of a complicated case might contain depositions, subpoenas, indictments, bills, notes, letters, and any other written evidence or court orders pertaining to the case. At the end of the court term the individual case bundles were gathered



together, labeled, tied with a string or ribbon, and filed in boxes as part of the court records.

The court order and minute books give only an outline of the transactions of court affairs, but the bundles contain all the existing details, and so I read every bundle I could find in the Smithland courthouse that concerned the Lewises or anyone with whom they had any connection. This search covered the years from 1800 to 1816 and took about three month's time. Very few of these bundles had ever been opened since they were first filed away nearly 170 years ago, and it was an eerie feeling to have the dim figures of the early settlers spring to life, flawed, distraught, indignant, but in every case human and alive again for a few moments in my imagination.

The unexpected find which all this is leading up to was an unpaid bill for medical services rendered to the Lewis family during eight months of the year 1809. The Lewises had not paid their doctor and he had submitted the bill as evidence in the ensuing law suit. From this bill I was able to determine much about several members of the family, their location at that time, the nature of their ailments, and the treatment and health of their slaves.

Another particularly helpful discovery that was made in the bundles was the record of two auction sales. When Randolph and then later Lilburne died, their personal property was sold by order of the court, so that money would be available to provide for the orphans. Everything the brothers owned, except their land, was sold: clothes, furniture and utensils, livestock, slaves, tools, everything down to four fish hooks which brought twelve and one-half cents. For each item sold, the buyer and the price paid was listed. These auction records, which provided a wealth of information, are reproduced in an appendix of the book.

Other parts of the research were disappointing in that after much work the leads played out in a dead end. For example, after Isham Lewis escaped from jail in Smithland it was said that he returned to Natchez, took an alias, married, and lived there for three years. I had read somewhere that people who take aliases usually retain some features of their true names: perhaps their first or last name, or their initials, or in many cases, they borrow part of a name from a friend or relative.

I knew the general time period that Isham was in Natchez, and I thought that if he married under an alias, then perhaps the



marriage records might give me a clue to work on. After an hour or so of reading the records, and as I approached the most probable date of Isham's marriage, one name jumped out at me from the page, Isham Griffin. Shortly before this time Isham Lewis's sister had married a man named Griffin and I thought I had a lead worth checking out.

Most towns have one or two elderly citizens who are recognized as being experts on local history. Usually these people enjoy their roles and are generous in helping the uninformed. In Natchez, a certain Col. Nessick was the ranking local expert. He was a voluble, friendly, and enthusiastically helpful source of information. A retired military man, he had married into one of the prestigious families of Natchez. I had talked with him previously and now I was hopeful that he could assist me with Isham Griffin, who I suspected was actually Isham Lewis. I called Col. Nessick, told him of Isham's deplorable record, and what I suspected about the alias, and I asked him if he knew anything about Isham Griffin.

Suddenly Col. Nessick's friendly manner disappeared and in its place was the cold, tense, anxiety of a military commander in a desperate defensive position.

"Mr. Merrill," he said, "It is impossible that Isham Lewis could have used the name Isham Griffin. My wife is a descendant of Isham Griffin." With that non sequitur the Colonel hung up, and I, having lost my best ally, gave up the pursuit of Isham Griffin.

Another dead end in my research followed the days I spent comparing the state constitutions of Kentucky and Missouri. I had hoped George's murder was not a completely isolated and meaningless tragedy; that perhaps somehow his death might have had some ameliorating effect on the institution of slavery. Not too long after George's murder, deliberations began for the drafting of the Constitution of the State of Missouri. A surprisingly large proportion of the settlers in this area were emigrants from Kentucky and influential among them were several men from Livingston County. I thought that perhaps these people might have remembered George and included provisions in their new constitution that would have made the plight of their slaves more tolerable. This was not the case. Just as Kentucky's first constitution was pretty much a copy of Virginia's, so was Missouri's first constitution a near copy of Kentucky's second constitution, the one in force when George was murdered.



Such dead ends in research are disappointing, but occasionally one stumbles upon a technique which is rewarding. I needed to find out the amount and the exact location of all of the property owned by the Lewis family both in Virginia and in Kentucky. The deeds, which are readily available, gave the dates, acreage, price paid, and the outline dimensions of each piece of property acquired by the family, and also the same information when they sold it. But to locate it exactly was more of a problem, since property corners were often described by temporary features such as a sycamore on the river bank, a rock with a hickory witness, or crossing Cypress Run to an owl sitting on a dead snag, as one legendary deed is supposed to have read. Wherever a river bank or a creek was named as part of the description it was a great help because it gave a general point of departure. I say general, because not only the names, but even the features themselves change. Last year the river bank in front of Rocky Hill was more than a quarter of a mile west of where it was in 1810 and thanks to the dam it will soon be changed again, along with the channel.

The key to locating these properties exactly was provided by the contour maps published by the U.S. Geological Survey of the Department of the Interior. These maps record every major surface feature of the land and are drawn to a certain scale and orientation. I thought that by taking the surveyor's description in each deed, and by reducing the rods to feet and converting the footage measurements to the same scale as the survey maps, I could, with the help of a twenty-cent protractor, measure the angles, and make a small plat that ought to fit somewhere on the map. In every case they did. In most cases the creeks, road beds, land contours, and even the property lines had changed very little since 1810, which was a great help, for these features were usually mentioned in the boundary descriptions found in the deeds.

In this way I was able to reconstruct the borders of the 3,000 acre Lewis plantation in Virginia, and describe its growth and its dissolution. The same process was used with the Lewis land in Kentucky.

Another nice thing about research is that it furnishes an excuse for travel. I worked personally in every state but one that borders on the Ohio River, plus Virginia, Tennessee, and Mississippi, three state capitols, eight county courthouses; six historical societies, and more than twenty-five libraries. There were fifteen or twenty other collections that I did not get to visit, but with whose librarians



I had the pleasure of corresponding, which is after all a lesser sort of travel.

In spite of the several investigations that did not produce any useful material, I was beginning to build up a sizable pile of good information that was pretty much worthless unless it could be put into some organized filing system. Filing the research material under the characters' names would be helpful, but in trying to reconstruct the events, a chronological file was also essential. Therefore I began to keep two card files, and every fact or event I thought might be relevant to anyone in the story was noted twice, once by date in one file, and again in the other file under the name of the character involved. In cases where several characters were involved in one situation or event, one entry was made in the chronological file under the name of each individual. For example, if a jury of eighteen people was convened, then that jury meeting was noted once in the chronological file and eighteen different places in the character file.

This was a tremendously time-consuming job but it was proportionately rewarding for this reason: all the minor characters in this story—and even some of the major ones—had been forgotten and lost during the years since the Lewis tragedy occurred. This filing system brought them back to life in a way, for as the shreds of information in the character file grew and grew, they tended to cluster around certain people's names until in about twenty-five cases, the information became too voluminous to be kept on five- by eight- inch index cards, and file folders were required. Most of these characters, not even hinted at in the legends, became characters of major importance in the book. Most of the cards in the character file noted very little or unimportant information, and when it came time to organize and write the book, it was easy to determine who to discard and who must be included. At the same time, when the actual writing began, the chronological file provided an outline of every event in its proper sequence.

By 1970 I was spending so much time on the Lewis story that it was interfering with my life as a farmer; or it may have been that farming interfered with my interest in the Lewises. At any rate, I rented out the farm and moved to Lexington so that I could use the University of Kentucky libraries. By then I had decided to try to put the story in book form. I assured my wife, Marian, that it would be for just one year, sort of like a long vacation, and to make it more attractive, I promised that we could eat out all meals on every



weekend. Five years later we were still in Lexington, and she was still holding me to that deal.

Choosing the form in which to tell the story was a real problem to me. At first I wanted to present it as historical fiction, a category of writing that generally sells well, and in some cases sells very well indeed. I had some doubts, however, that historical fiction would be the most suitable form, and when I finally came across the numerous Thomas Jefferson letters to and from the Lewis family, or concerning their affairs, then I knew I would have to use the scholarly, documented form of writing history. Very few of these Jefferson-Lewis letters had been published before, and I felt they deserved a factual rather than an imaginary setting.

Other than the clerical drudgery of proper documentation, the greatest difficulty I had with the scholarly form was trying to keep my opinions, feelings, and my personality out of the book: in effect, to work only with facts even though the subject of the work was a story seething with black emotions and turmoil, a story that naturally invokes horror rather than a mood of dispassionate analysis. My feeling is that a person writing history in the scholarly form should think of himself as the agent by whom the facts of the past are recorded. He should not mistake himself for a storyteller or public entertainer.

After settling in our Lexington home, and enrolling our two children in school, we remodeled the garage so I would have a place to write, and I started in. There were interruptions in the writing in order to verify or find new information at the libraries in Lexington, Frankfort or Louisville. There were also other frequent interruptions. We lived in a subdivision, and by 8:00 in the morning every man within four or five blocks had gone off to work. I was the only remaining man around, a guy with no job who sat in his garage all day long. A very suspicious situation, but convenient when a man was needed to get a snake out of the neighbor's basement, to stop a dog fight, to administer first aid to a lost child, or to put out a fire—all of which I did. I was becoming a one-man local disaster squad when the last straw fell on my back. One morning the doorbell rang. Marian answered it and there stood Stevie, a charming three-year-old of whom we were both particularly fond. I had fixed his tricycle the day before. Stevie looked up at Marian and asked, "Can Mr. Merrill come out and play?" The next day I rented an office downtown with no telephone, and my output of work doubled, at least.



You might be interested in the mechanical aspects of the way I found easiest to write. Since I do not use a typewriter, I write in an ordinary spiral notebook using alternate lines on the right hand page. The left page, if needed, is used for notes, or for sentences or paragraphs which are too long to be interlined in the lines left vacant on the right hand page. Where many people use the margins for such editing or additions, I seem to require every other line plus a whole page. The result was really a terrible thing to behold; some words scratched out, others added, and paragraphs drifting alone on the wrong page, tied to the text by a red line. It is a near miracle, of which I stand in awe and gratitude, that Marian, and Mrs. Dorothy Gibbs, of Lexington, could have taken these notebooks and produced a clean and first class typescript. Writing in this manner my daily output of work probably averaged no more than 500 words, and often there were times I had to discard work that had taken several days or a week to get on paper.

There is just one more thing I would like to say about the mechanical aspects of writing. *The Manual of Style*, published by the University of Chicago Press, is the nearly universal standard guide for writing in English. The book is complex and laborious to use, but if it were used conscientiously, a bright high school graduate could turn out a manuscript that would meet the most exacting mechanical requirements of the University Presses. The additional use of Roget's *Thesaurus*, Wilson Follett's *Modern American Usage*, and *The Elements of Style* by Strunk and White, would help to add precision and polish and make any beginner's writing more acceptable. I could not have finished *Jefferson's Nephews* properly without the help of these books.

At last the great day came when, after several revisions, I thought I had finished the book. Since it contained a couple of chapters of new information about Thomas Jefferson, I did not want to submit the manuscript for publication until it had been read by at least two eminent Jeffersonian scholars. I wanted to be sure I had made no errors, either of fact or emphasis. Dr. James Bear, the curator of Monticello, had been generously helpful during the weeks I was working in Charlottesville, Virginia, and he agreed to read the manuscript.

Another scholar who consented to read and criticize my work was Dr. Julian Boyd, of Princeton, New Jersey. Dr. Boyd is the editor of *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, a monumental work that will exceed fifty volumes when it is completed twenty-five or thirty



years from now. Dr. Boyd is the tireless and meticulous scholar who once began work on a footnote and traced and expanded it so diligently that it was published separately as a book. The book, *Number 7: Alexander Hamilton's Secret Attempts to Control American Foreign Policy*, can still be purchased from the Princeton University Press.

I had admired Dr. Boyd's work, and tried in my own book to duplicate his exacting standards. You can imagine my pleasure when Dr. Boyd wrote back that he had read the manuscript and thought it was an honest work of some importance. I had labored over this book for nearly a decade, and five years of that, full time, all without any assurance that it would ever be published. I expected that it would take at least a year or two to find a publisher, when Dr. Boyd went on to say that if I didn't mind he would like to send it over to Princeton University Press with his recommendation that they put it in print.

Naturally I agreed, and the manuscript was read at the Press and then, as customary, was sent out to learned readers for their opinions as to whether or not the manuscript deserved publication. They were also asked to suggest changes in the work if they felt they were needed.

In addition to Dr. Boyd, Dr. Thomas D. Clark, whose name is surely familiar to you all, and Dr. Dumas Malone of the University of Virginia, read the work at the request of the Princeton Press. They recommended that the manuscript be condensed in certain parts, questioned a few other details, but did agree that the book was suitable for publication.

You can imagine my elation at this point. I knew the manuscript would have to be edited, and that after the type was set, it would be proofread, but except for these steps, I thought my work was done. Far from it: it took nearly a year to finish the editing and proofreading, and to obtain the quotation rights and permissions, to prepare the index, (which in card form, made a stack over three feet high) and to assist in the publicity for the sale of the book.

Whereas previously there had been no time schedule or deadline for the completion of the book, now there was, and I was not accustomed to this pressure. I gained a new respect for writers who work for newspapers and periodicals.

Margaret Case was the editor assigned to Jefferson's Nephews at Princeton. She made hundreds of suggestions to improve the book, and she was right in every case, be it a comma, the scale to which a



map was drawn, deletions, grammar, and so forth. The most humbling correction I had to make was to change the word "which" to "that". There was scarcely a page that did not need this elementary correction, and I finally felt so embarrassed that I wrote and apologized for sending her on a "which" hunt. Apparently this is a common error, and some time later I was relieved to read a humorous memoir by another editor who said that his whole career had been spent changing "which" to "that" and "that" to "which". He said finally that whenever he came upon one of these two words in a manuscript he automatically changed it to the other.

After mailing the manuscript back and forth several times, Mrs. Case and I felt it was ready to be set in print. At this point the manuscript is presumed to be free of all mechanical errors and to contain every needed revision, so that any errors that turn up in the proofs will be errors made by the typesetter.

It requires two people to proofread the work of the typesetter. The author's assistant reads to the author from the supposedly-perfect, edited manuscript, and the author follows along with the reader on the galley proofs, marking on the proofs every place where the two versions of the work are not identical, and at the same time correcting errors in spelling and typography. In addition to the words, every single mark of punctuation is read out by the assistant.

For example here are two sentences from the book as read by the proofreading assistant to the author:

Then the grand jury returned to court with three charges  
colon one for profane swearing comma one indicting James  
McCawley comma and one against quote Lilburne Lewis and  
Isham Lewis for murder comma a true bill period close quote  
Having nothing further to present comma the second grand  
jury was then dismissed period note four paragraph.

After four or five days of this two things happen: you become accustomed to the voice of your assistant, which is to say you hear it no matter where you are, in your sleep and when you are awake as well. The other side effect of the proofreading experience is that it becomes almost impossible to read anything in a normal fashion period it apostrophe s enough to drive one quote batty close quote exclamation mark paragraph.



Up to this stage in bookmaking it is not expensive or difficult to correct errors, but after the galley proofs have been incorporated into page proofs and set, it is a different matter, for the pages are combined together in units of eight for the final printing. Consequently the correction of one word involves resetting the type on eight pages, which is almost impossible to do without introducing new typographical errors where there were none before. There are about a dozen typographical errors in *Jefferson's Nephews*, most of which are in the notes and index, thank goodness. The four or five typos that sneaked into the main text are each like a stab in the author's heart. When these typos were mentioned by a couple of book reviewers I tried to console myself with hope that they would be banished to a basement closet, there to read proof for the rest of their lives.

One thing that publishers seem to enjoy especially is choosing the title for a book. Some people think that the first thing an author does is to write down a title and then follow with the rest of the book. In this case, I wrote the book and submitted it with a list of seven or eight suggested titles, hoping the publishers would pick one of them, which they did. I was in no position to argue, since by then the publisher owned the work, and in order to have good sales they needed a title that would be a good attention getter and would represent accurately the general subject matter.

In this case I was actually relieved that the press, and not I, chose the title, because it was a title that offended Dr. Boyd. His work had been essential to me in the preparation of the book, and it was he who was most important in finding a publisher for it. Dr. Boyd had spent many years of his own life immersed in the life of Thomas Jefferson, and I sensed an affinity of spirit and character on the part of Dr. Boyd for Jefferson. Dr. Boyd had written earlier that he felt that since Jefferson was not in any way personally or directly involved in the Lewis tragedy that it was a misrepresentation to use Jefferson's name in the title in connection with his terrible nephews. In a way I agreed with him and told him so. On the other hand, if Lilburne and Isham had not been Jefferson's nephews, this would have been merely another story of a slave murder; a record of only one out of hundreds of similar acts of depravity which stand alone without the stunning contrast of Jefferson's noble idealism to heighten the impact. The publishers realized this, and also realized that Jefferson's name in the title would help to sell copies. So when the Press chose the title, it happened to be the



one I thought was most suitable, but it was one that was a disappointment to Dr. Boyd.

On a brighter note I would like to mention the reviews that were given to *Jefferson's Nephews*. It received favorable full page or longer reviews in the London *Times Literary Supplement*, the *New York Times Book Review* and the Sunday magazine sections of the *Louisville Courier Journal* and the *Evansville Courier Press*. It received shorter but equally laudatory reviews in *Newsweek* magazine, the foreign edition of *Time* magazine, and the leading newspapers of Chicago, Washington, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Atlanta, Boston, and many other cities. It also received similar reviews in a dozen or so historical and specialized journals, including the *Harvard Law Review* which noted in passing that the author was an amateur lawyer, which seemed fair enough since the author was also an amateur historian, and an amateur writer.

This was a very exciting time for me. There were friendly letters arriving daily, phone calls from distant places, invitations to speak in public, and even a television show or two. I was riding high when I received a brief stabilizing note from a librarian in Altoona, Pennsylvania, who wrote:

Dear Mr. Merrill: I have just finished reading *Jefferson's Nephews*. On page 273 you said it was unlikely that the two brothers "would be hung for murder". Pictures are *hung*; people are *hanged*.

Yours truly,

And she signed the letter.

Well, I scratched off one Brownie point and thought I should be pleased that at least one person had read the book very carefully, and I hoped that no other librarians had noticed the error.

This was the most concise and literate letter I received. Many of the other letters requested genealogical information about the Lewises. These were usually lengthy, handwritten, newsy and amiable in tone, and I tried to answer them all.

The last and perhaps the most practical way to judge a book's reception is by the volume of its sales. *Jefferson's Nephews* sold about ten thousand copies in hardback, beginning at \$16.50 per copy, and later \$18.00 per copy, prices I thought were quite high. The people at Princeton University Press have told me that this volume of sales is quite respectable for a scholarly press publication. At the same



time that *Jefferson's Nephews* was released, another book concerning slavery was published by a commercial house, and I watched with envy as, amidst a deluge of publicity, the sales of that book exceeded a million copies. At that time I felt as though the sales of *Jefferson's Nephews* had been pulled up by the *Roots* of Alex Haley.

After the hardback sales of *Jefferson's Nephews* had peaked, the paperback rights were sold to Avon, which printed and sold 100,000 copies at \$3.95 each. It was interesting to discover that the sale to Avon, like many such paperback sales, was done by auction over the telephone. Prior to the sale Princeton Press had notified most of the large paperback firms that on a certain day, between the hours of say ten and three, they would receive bids for the paperback rights to *Jefferson's Nephews*. The bids were phoned in and Avon's bid was the highest.

It was to be expected that when *Jefferson's Nephews* became available in paperback at four dollars per copy the hardback sales at \$18.00 per copy would dip sharply, but despite that, the sale to Avon was remunerative to Princeton Press and to me. In spite of our wild hopes, neither the Press nor I really expected to make a lot of money from *Jefferson's Nephews*, and indeed it is not the main function of a scholarly press to make profit if it interferes with their prime function. That function is to publish fine scholarship that would not be published otherwise, and to do it in spite of the disinterest of a generally unconcerned public. I would guess that very few University Presses are unsubsidized. While they do welcome works which meet their standards and show a profit as well, still it should be recognized that it is they who, often at a loss, preserve serious work that could not be profitably published by commercial houses.

The money I have received from *Jefferson's Nephews* is just about equal to the amount of money I spent in writing it. There has been no financial pay for the years of time, but it was worth the effort for there have been abundant rewards of a more lasting nature. Here are two of them: In 1976 the Princeton University Press nominated *Jefferson's Nephews* for the Pulitzer award in the History category; and at the present time *Jefferson's Nephews* is being used as a textbook by the University of California for a graduate level course in the writing of history.

Such tributes cannot be bought for any amount of royalty money. Nor can comments like these from the New York Times: "*Jefferson's Nephews* is a stunning tragedy with larger



resonances. . . . It is superb; it has the suspense of a great detective story. *Jefferson's Nephews* is as absorbing, as gruesome, and as intelligent as Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*."

Equally rewarding was the comment in Newsweek magazine which stated that "Murder is only the climax of the story; the deeper substance lies in the author's examination of America's harsh pioneer heritage and his profile of a prominent and powerful family and their economic and spiritual disintegration."

My favorite reviewer's comment of all was one that gives me hope that someday, maybe, this book might be made into a movie. The London *Times* said of the murder and trial scenes "Cecil B. de Mille! Thou shouldst be living at this hour." How I wish he were!

Being invited to speak to you tonight about *Jefferson's Nephews* is another shining star in my crown, and one that I shall treasure, for I realize that without you there would be very few books to be had at all, and it would be a dark world indeed.